

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: New Nonprofit Wins Grant to Create Spineless Cave Preserve in Giles County**

New preserve will protect rare and unique invertebrate animals, and keep their mountain home forested forever.

**Blacksburg, VA - March 21, 2026** Virginia Institute for Invertebrates (VII), a newly founded scientific organization dedicated to revealing and preserving the hidden biodiversity of animals that lack backbones, today announced that it would receive a \$700,000 grant from the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to establish a 222 acre "Spineless Cave Preserve" on East River Mountain in Giles County, Virginia. The tract of land to be protected contains the eponymous Spineless Cave and is home to rare plants and unique animals.

One of these rare animals is a new species of millipede discovered on the site of the future preserve by Dr. Jackson Means, a Director of the Virginia Institute for Invertebrates, the Assistant Curator of Recent Invertebrates at the Virginia Museum of Natural History, and a world expert on the genus *Nannaria* to which it belongs. The preserve will also be home to an imperiled spider (*Nesticus mimus*) that is adapted to life in caves, as well as a previously unknown species of spider belonging to the family of sheet weavers, Linyphiidae. These are the little spiders responsible for the dozens of tiny horizontal webs covered with dew that can be seen dotting fields on summer mornings.

Importantly, Spineless Cave Preserve will remain forested in perpetuity. VII is partnering with the 500-Year Forest Foundation to remove invasive plants from the site and manage the plant life to ensure that this mountainside will someday be covered with old growth forest. Restoring and maintaining the forest in this way is essential not just for the incredible diversity of invertebrates that live there, but for struggling vertebrates as well. The site of Spineless Cave Preserve has been identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as essential habitat for the success of the Golden-winged Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*), and The Nature Conservancy has designated the area as part of the Resilient and Connected Network, a network of sites identified by scientists as important for sustaining ecological functions under a changing climate.

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) will hold a deed of dedication on the property, making it part of DCR's network of Natural Area Preserves across the state. This is the strongest legal protection possible for keeping Spineless Cave Preserve natural, forested, and free from destructive interference.

In addition to providing habitat to its assortment of invertebrate and vertebrate animals, Spineless Cave Preserve will provide a protected space where VII can continue to innovate new technologies and test new methods for monitoring invertebrate populations. It will also be a vital resource for seeking out more species unknown to science and for illuminating the surprising and complex ways in which invertebrate animals find food, reproduce, evade predation, and otherwise make their way in the economy of nature.

### **About the Virginia Institute for Invertebrates**

Founded in 2024, Virginia Institute for Invertebrates, Ltd. is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to conserving the rich invertebrate fauna of Virginia, uncovering the fascinating natural history of these understudied organisms, and building the infrastructure to monitor their dwindling

populations. By focusing on these under-explored taxa and their habitats, the nonprofit aims to fill critical knowledge gaps that hinder effective environmental stewardship.

Website: <https://virginiainvertebrates.org/>

Press kit: <https://virginiainvertebrates.org/press-kits/2026-march-21/>

VOF grant announcement: <https://www.vof.org/2026/03/16/vof-announces-2-2-million-for-forest-conservation-in-southwest-virginia/>

500 YFF website: <https://500yearforest.org/>

USDA NRCS warbler program: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/working-lands-for-wildlife/golden-winged-warbler>